DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 162 312 CS 204 457

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TITLE The Patterning of Language Variation in Writing.
PUB DATE Nov 76
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Modern Language Association (18th, St. Louis, Missouri, November 4-6, 1976) ; Best copy available

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Dialects; Black Students; *Dialect Studies; Higher Education; *Language Patterns; Language Research; *Language Variation; Sociolinguistics; Speech Communication; *Writing; Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

The occurrence of Black English Vernacular (BEV) dialect features in the writing of 42 inner-city college students was studied using such sociolinguistic methods as variable rule analysis, computer programs, and implicational scales. A comparison of the patterns found in the subjects' writing with those found in spoken BEV revealed that sometimes, as in /-t, d/ deletion, the patterns in writing parallel the patterns in speech. However, in other cases, such as the hypercorrect verb plural "s," the feature patterns in writing differ from those in speech. The results of this research should be directed toward composition teachers to help them understand their students' writing problems and also toward linguists to show that writing can also be a source of data to study the patterning of language variation. (FL)

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THE PATTERNING OF LANGUAGE VARIATION IN WRITING*

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Dialect studies have traditionally been based on speech, and rightly so because it is in the style of casual speech that dialect features find their fullest expression. However, as anyone who has ever taught composition knows, dialect features (particularly grammatical ones) also appear in writing. Except for when they occur in certain kinds of "dialect literature," they have usually been considered "errors," things to be marked with red pens and avoided. Sociolinguists and dialectolcgists, following the principle that language is primarily spoken, have not studied dialect features in writing to any great extent. There have been a few studies, such as Smitherman 1969 and Wolfram and Whiteman 1971, but on the whole there has not been a thorough investigation of this topic. Several reasons for this are apparent. First, of course, has been the emphasis on language as speech. Second is a belief that there is something random or unsystematic about the occurrence of dialect features in writing. For example, anyone when writing rapidly can leave an s off of a 3sg. pres. verb or a noun pl., even though these endings are intact in their own spoken dialect. Finally, unlike speech, writing can be revised and edited. Although there are regular patterns in the occurrence of dialect features in speech, such editing could obscure any systematic relationships of these features in writing.

Our research has shown, however, that the occurrence of dialect

*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the American Dialect Society Midwest Regional Meeting in St. Louis, November 4, 1976.

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features in writing can be studied systematically. For this research we have used some of the newer sociolinguistic methods for studying language variation. These methods involve the techniques of variable rule analysis developed by Labov and others (Labov et al 1968; Labov 1972a, 1972b; and particularly the computer program of Cedergren and Sankoff 1974) and implicational scales as developed by such linguists as Fasold 1970; DeCamp 1971, 1973; C.-J. Bailey 1973; and Bickerton 1973. We have used these techniques to study the occurrence of Black English Vernacular dialect features in the writing of forty-two college students from the inner city of Dayton, Ohio. Out of some twenty-one features studied, we will in this paper be able to discuss only a few typical examples. (For complete details see Terrebonne 1975.) We will give examples of both variable rule analysis and implicational scales. Variable rule analysis will be demonstrated by the familiar /-t,d/ deletion rule and also by hypercorrect 3pl. verb s. An implicational scale is used to show the relationships of a number of features studied.

/-t,d/ deletion:

Studies by Labov et al in New York (1968, also Labov 1972a), Wolfram in Detroit (1969), and Fasold in Washington, D.C., (1972) have well established the patterns of variation for this feature of BEV. Briefly the hierarchy of constraints for this rule are as listed by Fasold 1972:98:

(1) Deletable consonant preceded by another consonant;

(2) Deletable consonant not followed by a word beginning with a vowel;

(3) Boundary does not intervene between deletable consonant and and preceding consonant;

(4a) Final and prefinal consonants separated by a formative boundary;

(4b) Syllable ending in the deletable consonant has weak accent;

(5) Deletable consonant is preceded by a sonorant consonant;

(6) Deletable consonant is preceded by a continuant consonant.

Environment (1) favors the rule the most, followed by (2), etc.

The first major difference between these patterns and those in writing has to do with the presence or absence of the boundary, whether the /-t,d/ is bimorphemic or monomorphemic. The English spelling system is morphophonemic--basically we spell morphemes, not sounds. For example, we spell the conjunction and, a-n-d, regardless of whether we say it /ænd/, /ən/, or even /m̩/ (as in the rapid pronunciation of "up and down"). Consequently, the loss of monomorphemic /-t,d/ is virtually nonexistent in writing. Although people pronounce just /jʌs/, no one spells it j-u-s-s. (There are a few examples, however, of missing /-t,d/ when an existing English word can be used to spell the sounds, as in fine for find.) The variation in writing, on the whole, is therefore limited almost exclusively to bimorphemic /-t,d/.

Secondly, to eliminate what may be only "slips of the pen" or "careless errors," we have based our analysis on individuals with 10% or more /-t,d/ deletion.

With these qualifications in mind, we can begin to compare the patterns found in the writing of the Dayton informants with those of spoken BEV. Some parallels are quite striking. The following table, for example, shows the comparison of Fasold's Washington informants with the Dayton informants in terms of the effect of

the following environment on the presence or absence of bimorphemic /-d/:

Table 1. Effect of the following environment on the presence of /-d/ representing the -ed suffix.

Washington, D.C., informants: (Fasold 1972: 44, Table 7)

	__##V	__##(C)
Present	47	41
Absent	7	26
Percent absent	13.0	38.8

Dayton informants:

	__##V	__##(C)
Present	22	35
Absent	4	13
Percent absent	15.4	27.1

These figures illustrate that for the Dayton informants, as for the Washington, D.C., informants, a following vowel constrains /-d/ deletion, though absence occurs sometimes, e.g. "my mother try everything she knew"; and although the percentage of deletion is less in the preconsonantal position for the Dayton informants than for the Washington informants, the relationship between a following vowel and a following consonant are quite similar to Fasold's results.

Another parallel is the effect of the type of the preceding consonant when there is a cluster, as seen in the following table:

Table 2. Effect of three types of preceding consonants on final bimorphemic cluster simplification.

Washington, D.C., informants: (Fasold 1972: 70, Table 17)

	Sonorants__##	Spirants__##	Stops__##
Intact	54	57	77
Simplified	93	55	46
Percent simplified	63.3	49.1	37.4

Dayton informants:

	Sonorants__##	Spirants__##	Stops__##
Intact	53	131	46
Simplified	64	103	35
Percent simplified	54.7	44.0	43.2

Although the difference between the three environments is not as great for the Dayton informants as for the Washington informants, the relationships between the categories are still maintained, and sonorants definitely favor deletion more among both groups than either stops or spirants. For example, deletion is more common in sentences like "when I got off the diet I gain more weight" than in sentences like "we rap almost all night long" or "everybody laugh but the teacher."

A comparison of Fasold's results regarding the effect of stress on final bimorphemic cluster simplification with data for the Dayton

informants shows further parallels:

Table 3. Effect of stress and the absence of stress on final bimorphemic cluster simplification.

Washington, D.C., informants: (Fasold 1972: 75, Table 19)

	Stressed Syllables	Unstressed Syllables
Intact	164	9
Simplified	117	21
Percent simplified	41.6	70.0

Dayton informants:

	Stressed Syllables	Unstressed Syllables
Intact	207	30
Simplified	164	50
Percent simplified	44.2	62.5

The figures here are very close for the two groups.

To put all these factors together and to measure their weights statistically, we have used the Cedergren/Sankoff computer program, which assigns probabilities to the different factors that affect the application or nonapplication of a variable rule. There are three groups of factors, as follows:

Group I: Accompanying Stress Factor

A = Accented syllable
U = Unaccented syllable

Group II: Preceding Phonetic Environment

W = Vowel
K = Consonant
R = r

Group III: Following Phonetic Environment

C = Consonant
V = Vowel
P = Pause

These factor groups provide for a possibility of 18 environments, 17 of which were filled. The applications model of the computer program was the better fit; it assigned the following weights to the various features: ($p_o = 0.32$)

A = 0.31; U = 0.0
W = 0.51; K = 0.0; R = 0.26
C = 0.0; V = 0.16; P = 0.17

Observed vs. expected frequencies were as follows:

($X^2 = 9.954$)

Env.	Obs.	Exp.	Env.	Obs.	Exp.
AWC	28/38	29.22	AKC	117/221	116.80
UWC	4/5	3.33	UKC	14/46	14.62
AWV	19/21	16.94	AKV	62/108	65.39
UWV	3/5	3.60	UKV	12/21	9.02
AWP	2/4	3.24	AKP	28/42	25.62
UWP	1/1	0.72	UKP	4/13	5.66
ARC	18/26	16.88	ARV	12/18	12.71
URC	10/20	9.85	URV	8/16	9.20
ARP	5/6	4.26			

The program illustrates that the factor which restrains /-t,d/ deletion most is a preceding vowel and that the effect of a preceding r

is almost exactly intermediate between the effect of a preceding vowel and a preceding consonant. Furthermore, the program indicates that being in a stressed syllable is also an important constraint on /-t,d/ deletion and that least important is the nature of the following phonetic environment: a following vowel and pause are nearly equal in their restraint on deletion; a following consonant favors deletion.

We ran a separate program on consonant cluster simplification alone; that is, we excluded from this analysis forms with a preceding vowel or preceding r. The factor groups which we set up were the following:

Group I: Accompanying Stress Factor

A = Accented syllable
U = Unaccented syllable

Group II: Preceding Consonant Type

O = Obstruent (Stop)
F = Fricative (Sibilant)
S = Sonorant

Group III: Following Phonetic Environment

C = Consonant
V = Vowel
P = Pause

These factor groups provide for a possibility of 18 environments, 17 of which were filled. The applications model of the computer program assigned the following weights to the various factors: (p_o = 0.238)

A = 0.31; U = 0.0
O = 0.15; F = 0.18; S = 0.0
C = 0.0; V = 0.14; P = 0.17

Observed vs. expected frequencies were: (X^2 = 11.11)

Env.	Obs.	Exp.	Env.	Obs.	Exp.
AOC	24/44	24.30	UOC	1/2	0.70
AFC	58/103	58.53	UFC	10/25	9.37
ASC	29/56	26.52	USC	3/19	4.52
AOV	17/31	19.07	UOV	1/1	0.44
AFV	32/51	32.07	UFV	9/17	7.86
ASV	12/25	13.68	USV	2/3	1.03
AOP	3/3	1.88			
AFP	21/31	19.86	UFP	1/7	3.36
ASP	4/8	4.49	USP	3/6	2.19

Regarding the preceding stress factor and the following phonetic environment, these figures are consistent with the earlier analysis of all /-t,d/ deletion. Furthermore, the significance of a preceding sonorant in favoring deletion and the corresponding restraining influence of both stops and fricatives is apparent. The data does not, however, confirm Fasold's results, which showed fricatives being intermediate between stops and sonorants.

On the whole, these analyses of /-t,d/ deletion support previous studies of the variable. Several important confirmations are: 1) deletion is most favored when the deletable /-t,d/ is preceded by another consonant, especially a sonorant; 2) deletion is also favored when the syllable ending in the deletable /-t,d/ has weak stress; and 3) deletion is favored when the deletable /-t,d/ is following by another consonant. Thus the data indicates that the same constraints are in operation on the writing style of the Dayton BEV informants as operate in the speech of previously analyzed BEV informants from other inner city areas.

Hypercorrect 3pl. verb *s*:

A second example of the use of variable rule analysis is the hypercorrect 3pl. verb *s*, which was the only hypercorrection that occurred often enough to permit such analysis. Out of 634 3pl. pres. verbs, 63 (nearly 10%) ended in *s*. For this feature there is a distinct contrast between our findings and earlier ones dealing with speech. Fasold and Wolfram (1970: 64) found that this *s* suffix was "sporadically used with present tense verbs with subjects other than third person singular." In our data it is almost completely lacking on 1pl. and 2pl. verbs, and in 3pl. it occurred only once when the pronoun *they* was the subject. It*s* use is therefore confined to 3pl. verbs with noun subjects. In addition, it*s* use was not "sporadic" but governed by environmental constraints. For example, we ran this data on the computer with the following factor groups:

Group I: Preceding syntactic environment

S = Singular noun
R = Relative pronoun
O = Other (except *they*)

Group II: Type of Verb

H = *Have*
D = *Do*
A = Any other (except *be*)

The nonapplications probabilities model assigned the following weights to the various features (all 9 environments were filled): (p_o = 0.10)

S = 0.26; R = 0.21; O = 0.0
H = 0.15; D = 0.0; A = 0.07

The observed vs. the expected frequencies of the nine environments were as follows: (X^2 = 4.93)

Env.	Obs.	Exp.	Env.	Obs.	Exp.
HS	1/6	2.61	AS	6/14	5.34
HR	5/16	6.30	AR	8/21	7.05
HO	12/44	10.36	AO	24/153	24.77
DS	1/1	0.34			
DR	1/3	0.87			
DO	2/22	2.25	Total	60/280	

The most influential factor is a preceding singular noun, as in "the characters of the movie starts with the alien" and "rejection and failure walks hand in hand." Second is a relative pronoun subject, such as in "things that has been pressuring him." Third is the irregular verb have. Because of these statistically significant patterns and the relatively high frequency of occurrence of this feature in comparison to other hypercorrections, our study of writing contradicts Fasold's conclusion that in speech "hyper s is as much a violation of Black English rules as it is of the rules of Standard English" (1972: 133).

Implicational analysis:

A second method of analyzing variation is implicational scales. We used this type of analysis in order to gain some additional insight into the relationship between the informants and the linguistic variables. Following methods employed by DeCamp (1971) and Fasold (1970), we examined our data to see whether the use of one feature might imply the use of another feature, which in turn might imply the use of a third, etc.

For this implicational analysis we did not use all the features

we had studied but only those for which the frequency of occurrence was high or relatively high and for which the data was full or relatively full for all the informants. There were seven features which fit these criteria. We determined first the order of those features based on the number of informants using the feature vs. the number of informants not using the feature, as given in the table below: 1) d absence, 2) a before vowels, 3) third singular verb s absence, 4) third plural verb s presence, 5) noun plural s absence, 6) plural is, and 7) copula deletion.

Table 4. Ordering of seven key BEV features on the basis of the number of informants using the feature vs. the number not using the feature.

	# Inf. Using	# Inf. Not Using	# Inf. Whose Data Insufficient
1. d absence	35	7	0
2. a before vowels	25	9	8
3. 3rd sg. s absence	25	15	2
4. 3rd pl. s presence	22	12	8
5. Noun pl. s absence	22	20	0
6. Plural is	16	19	7
7. Copula deletion	12	30	0

In Table 5, we then list the informants in an order determined by their use of all these seven features. This table does not of course result in the perfect scalability of Fasold's "hypothetical" model (1970: 562) or DeCamp's Jamaican English scale (1971: 355-357). However, despite the fact that there are a number of cells (32 in

TABLE 5

Implicational Relationship Between Seven Key Features

Inf.	-d	a/an	-s3sg.	+s3pl.	-sNoun pl.	Pl. is	-Copula
EJ	++	++	++	+	+	++	+
BD	++	+	++	+	+	+	+
RR	++	++	++	--	+	--	+
PM	+	+	++	+	+	+	+
ED	+	++	++	+	+	+	++
GD	+	--	+	--	+	+	+
CB	+	++	++	+	+	0	+
FJ	+	+	+	+	+	0	+
ME	+	+	+	+	+	0	(+)
DG	+	+	+	+	+	0	+
PD	+	0	++	0	+	0	+
CR	+	+	(+)	(+)	0	0	+
CH	+	+	+	+	+	+	0
HJ	+	+	+	0	++	+	0
RE	(+)	+	+	0	(+)	+	0
CM	+	0	+	++	+	+	0
PH	+	0	+	+	+	--	0
MB	(+)	0	+	+	0	+	0
LJ	+	+	+	+	+	0	0
DJ	+	+	+	+	+	0	0
CL	(+)	+	+	+	0	0	0
BT	+	--	--	+	0	--	0
WH	+	+	+	+	0	0	0
RW	+	--	+	--	0	--	0
PJ	(+)	+	+	0	0	+	0
AD	+	0	+	0	0	0	0
MJ	+	+	0	+	0	+	0
WS	(+)	+	0	(+)	0	(+)	0
FI	+	+	0	0	0	0	0
RJ	+	+	0	0	0	0	0
JC	(+)	+	0	--	(+)	0	0
HS	0	+	0	--	(+)	0	0
HA	+	--	0	0	0	+	0
TA	+	0	0	0	0	+	0
CS	+	0	0	+	0	0	0
WJ	(+)	--	0	--	(+)	--	0
CG	0	--	--	0	0	+	+
MW	0	+	0	--	0	--	0
JW	0	0	0	+	(+)	0	0
DL	0	--	0	0	0	0	0
RO	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
JR	0	--	0	--	0	--	0

Key to symbols: ++ = 50% or more use of the feature; + = 5 to 50% use of the feature; (+) = 0 to 5% use of the feature; 0 = nonuse of the feature; -- = insufficient data to determine use or nonuse.

fact) which deviate from the expected order of an implicational scale (an order which would be represented in the table by +'s always being to the left of any 0's), there is a significant degree of scalability. Out of 294 cells, 262 (or 89%) are in the expected order. Furthermore, 18 of the 42 informants (42.9%) fit the expected pattern exactly, and 17 other informants deviate from the pattern in only one cell.

Table 5, then, can in one sense be viewed as an actual illustration of Labov's "stages in the acquisition of Standard English" (1964). In another sense it can also be viewed as an illustration of how close each informant is to the Vernacular. Furthermore, what this table tells us about the informants and the features which they use has important implications for the education of Black Vernacular speakers. It illustrates, for example, that persons who delete the copula in their writing are very likely also to use all the other Vernacular features to the left of the deleted copula in this table. What this means for those who would teach these Vernacular speakers to write in Standard English is that the task ahead of them--both teachers and would-be learners--is formidable. At best what can be accomplished is probably no more than an imperfect learning of some of the features to the left of copula deletion in the table.

We believe that such application of this research to the teaching of writing is where its chief value lies. And in conclusion we would like to address ourselves to this problem. In 1974 Gary Underwood delivered a paper called "Bidialectal Freshman Handbooks--The Next Flim-Flam," in which he described such bidialectal handbcoks as "ideologically questionable, theoretically bankrupt, factually inaccurate, and pedagogically unsound" (Underwood 1974: 3). Since

that time such books have appeared and they do follow the description predicted by Underwood. Typically such a book presumes to teach students who speak what the authors euphemistically call "community dialect" to write Edited American English. To accomplish this, the book contrasts features of the "community dialect" with features of standard written English.

The significance of our research is that it shows just how unsound the linguistic basis of such books is. Books of this type are mainly concerned with the features of spoken Black English, with teaching students to recognize these and avoid them in their writing. Our work has shown that sometimes (as in /-t,d/ deletion, for example) the patterns of the occurrence of a feature in writing parallel its patterns in speech. However, in other cases (as in the example of hypercorrect verb pl. s), we are dealing with a feature with patterns in writing different from what they are in speech. Often a handbook is organized around the traditional parts of speech--verbs, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, etc. There is no concept that in writing some features are more basic problems than others, as shown by an implicational scale. Finally, there is no concept of the patterns of variation of the different features. They are treated as categorically present or absent.

We would not wish, however, that our work serve as the basis for still another kind of bidialectal handbook for teaching composition--one that is on a sounder linguistic basis than those that have appeared. For, like Underwood, we believe such books are "ideologically questionable." Rather, we would hope that our research would be directed toward composition teachers to help them understand

better their students' writing problems and also toward linguists to show that writing can also be a source of data to study meaningfully the patterning of language variation.

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